

# The Folkloric Influence on Odafe Atogun's Novels and the Artist's Craftsmanship

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## **Abstract**

*This research examines the three novels of a contemporary Nigerian novelist, Odafe Atogun whose narrative style has been generously compared to those of Franz Kafka, George Orwell and Amos Tutuola. These three novelists have been associated with the folkloric style of prose narrative. This study evaluated Atogun's works of fiction as belonging to the Tall Tale category of the folklore storyline. The novelists identified with this group adopt plots, characters and events that are outstandingly intriguing within the realm of reality. The study adopts magical realism as theoretical parameter in the analysis of the novels under study. This is a literary critical tool of inquiry that places emphasis on protagonists, plots and events in novels that are bereft of reality. The reason why Atogun is regarded as a novelist who adopts the surrealistic narrative technique becomes obvious in this study. In conclusion, it is discernable that the novels: *Taduno's Song*, *Wake Me When I'm Gone* and *The Cabal* by Atogun follow the well acclaimed creative styles of Franz Kafka, Orwell and Tutuola.*

**Key words:** Trilogy, Folkloric Narratives, Nigerian Novelist, Magical Realism, Tall Tale.

## **I**

Odafe Atogun is a Nigerian novelist who was born in Lokoja, North Central Nigeria and has published three novels to date. His debut is *Taduno's Song* (2016), *Wake Me When I'm Gone* (2017) and *The Cabal* (2023). His writings have been generously compared with those of renowned novelists like: Franz Kafka, George Orwell and Amos Tutuola (en.m.wikipedia). These novelists have a narrative technique that resembles fairy tales. George Orwell in *Animal Farm* uses the concepts of allegory and surrealistic creative writing to discuss the inequalities that exist in all creations including the world of lower animals. Franz Kafka is known to have published several novels that include: *The Trials*, *The Castle* and *Amerika* and the novella titled “*The Metamorphosis*”. “His works are a blend of elements of fantasy and realism...” (<https://litpriest.com>). It was in recognition of his unique style of writing that the word “Kafkaesque” emerged in the English dictionary to mean “extremely unpleasant, frightening, confusing, and similar to the situations described in the novels of Franz

Kafka” (<https://www.merriam-webster.com>) Kafkaesque is interpreted along the line of that which is unrealistic or difficult to believe. Amos Tutuola's style is similar to Kafka and Orwell. In his famous novel *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* which is seen as the first novel written by an African “to gain extensive exposure among western literary audience” (Larson, 3), and his second one titled *My Life in the Bush of Ghost*, he follows the writing pattern already associated with the duo of Kafka and Orwell.

Specifically, African literary artistes who practice folklore retell the legends, tales and superstitions that are popular with a particular ethnic group. Folklore is defined as “the whole of oral traditions shared by a particular group of people, culture or subculture...” (wikipedia.com). J.A. Cuddon views folklore within the broader perspective of the folk literature. For him folklore “is the creation of primitive and illiterate people-and therefore much of it belongs to oral tradition.” (p. 281). In another breath, Cuddon defines the fable as “a short narrative in prose or verse which points a moral” (p. 264). Can these novels of Atogun be classified as fables? They are not because Cuddon further classifies a fable as having “non-human creatures or inanimate things are normally the characters” (p. 264).

In as much as this research is about the novelist Odafe Atogun, it is his three published novels *Taduno's Song*, *Wake Me When I'm Gone* and *The Cabal*-that are of interest. The principal focus is on the singular subject of these novels being fictional stories written in tandem with the folkloric literary principles. In doing the content analysis of them, the attention is on the elements of the unbelievable and the features of exaggeration. This study also aims at achieving the purpose of discussing the novels of Atogun under one literary critical umbrella which is Magical Realism.

It is the dream like nature of these novels that has informed the theoretical approach to adopt in their analysis. Magical Realism according to J.A. Cuddon refers to the kind of literature where there is “the mingling and juxtaposition of the realistic and the fantastic or bizarre... miscellaneous use of dreams, myths and fairy stories... the horrific and the inexplicable.” (p. 417). According to Cuddon, some famous writers whose literary works can be described as belonging to this classification include: “Kafka, Ronald Firbank and Edward Upward” (p. 417). A.B. Chanady, a renowned scholar in this realm of study gives her views on what constitutes the major features of the Magical Realism literary theory. Amongst these is that it is “characterized first of all by two conflicting, but autonomously coherent perspectives... (which include) the acceptance of the supernatural as a part of everyday reality” (p. 18). The three novels of Atogun revolve around situations that seem impossible to believe on one hand and on the other hand discuss conflicts that are realistic in the immediate environment of the novelist.

## II

When the renowned Nigerian novelist Helon Habila states inter alia: “This is Odafe at his finest” (ouida.com), in reference to the novel *The Cabal*, I became anxious to read through it. His conclusion however remains subjective. He employs the same narrative complexity in *The Cabal* as in his other two novels. The novel begins at a moment of crisis; the love entanglement between the major male protagonist, Bako and two

female characters, Ave and Mimi. Of these two female folks, only Ave endures till the end of the novel.

The narrative of this novel does not revolve around these three characters alone. Atogun in his usual folkloric style of writing creates an anonymous character, The Man. This faceless personality provides solutions to the multitude of conflicts in the novel. In Atogun's characteristic style, The Man shares the same shadowing personality with 'Noah' and Mama, two characters of mystic personalities in his novel, *Wake me When I'm Gone*. The Man in *The Cabal* enjoys the same intensity of involvement in the novel as a similarly named character, The Man in Ayikwe Armah's *The Beautiful Ones are Not Yet Born*. The two novelists however achieve different purposes, adopting anonymous individuals in the resolution of the conflicts in their novels.

Atogun creates the first major conflict in the novel with the murder of Ave in the apartment of Bako by an unknown murderer. For “how could the police have known that a murder had taken place in his apartment?” (p. 25). The answer to this question can only be located in the concluding chapters of the novel. In the interim, Bako must escape from the grip of the policemen for the fear of been “locked up to rot away” (p. 26). It is while escaping from the arms of the law and in search of a human protection that a new vista opens in his life.

Two expressions in this novel suddenly change the trajectory of the narrative. A Y, Bako's friend suggestion to Bako “you may want to consider calling your father?” (p. 35) The other is the advice from A Y that “He is the only person who can help you in this circumstance.” (p. 33). These two expressions serve as the novelist's technique of stretching the narrative's elasticity. Bako in accepting the advice and seeking to answer the question of his close friend goes in search of a father whom he has abandoned for several years. It is in this search that he gets enmeshed into more profound and complex situations in an apartment at “the highbrow Palm View District where the rich and powerful lived” (p. 40). In this new world of intrigue, a new set of characters--Lobito and The Man emerge. This environment is where Bako comes to the full realization of the status of his father Cafftan (Yusoof). His father is described as “not just a member of the Cabal, he is the cabal” (p. 44). His father's ambition in politics is to “become a god one..., one that would be worshiped the length and breadth of the country” (p. 46).

To help unmask this huge political masquerade called Senator Cafftan, Atogun assigns to The Man the duty to inform Bako, “... your father and I are associates; in fact, I'm paid to protect his interest..., in a mysterious room where (he) keeps the records for the benefit of the powers that be, the men and women who control the affairs of this country. The records are used to shape destinies; in some cases, to change destinies...” (p. 64-65). The Man is assigned the role of taking Bako through the rudiments of his new responsibility in the political dynamics of this fiction. As the heir to the indefatigable Senator Cafftan (the Cabal) who is confined to a hospital bed due to illness, Bako needs to be properly tutored on the etiquette of his future position in the

government of this nation.

Atogun creates a room where all the impossible events take place. The Man as expected is in charge of this abode that contains the information of all past, present and future prominent politicians and leaders of this society. The Man as the custodian of all the real and imaginary things in this domain, advises Bako to take note of the following; "... It is for your own good that I bring you here. Whatever you see or learn in this room in the days ahead is for your knowledge alone. I repeat... your knowledge alone." (p. 65). The Man becomes the omniscient narrator used by Atogun to add flesh to the narrative. He informs the reader and Bako that "... I want you to know that whoever tried to kill your father will not stop. And if they succeed you will become the next target, to prevent you from taking over his dynasty and seeking revenge." (p. 66) He further informs Bako that "The only reason you are alive today is because your father is still alive, even if with the aid of a ventilator. There are forces beyond your knowledge watching over you. But if he were to die today, no power on earth would be able to protect you..." (p. 66) As an omnipresence character, The Man gives an insight into the culprit who has murdered Ave; "our investigations have revealed that your girl was killed by an insider... I mean one of your neighbours... It may well be that the person who tried to kill your father is the same one who ordered the killing" (p. 66). In tandem with his position as the 'Prefect' of this mysterious domain, he enlightens the major male protagonist of the decision of the loyalists of Senator Cafftan to seek for a spiritual solution to his health challenge; "On Monday to be precise, they will conduct a ritual of life and death, which will require one of your father's associates to wrestle with a mad man in a public arena" (p. 67). The outcome of this contest will determine the wellbeing of the sick Senator Cafftan. "According to the marabouts, if your father's associate succeeds in throwing the madman, your father will regain his health, but if the madman wins, your father will never recover from his illness..." (p. 67). This further establishes this novel as a good example of a folklore narrative where the incredibles are obtainable. The Man is able to have all these insights because of his dual personality; a man who possesses the spiritual "aura of light" and is also the "grey-looking receptionist" (p. 67) of "a vast room, a place of exceedingly bright lights like many suns revolving in one place, (where) everything in the room was made of light,... everything" (p. 63-64).

This room of light becomes the strong room that contains all the secrets that are crucial in the determination of the fate of all men in this society. It is in this secret abode that Senator Cafftan, the most powerful politician in the society appropriately has his office. In this venue and at the table of decision making "The chair of the head of the table was reserved for Cafftan, the one at the opposite end, for The Man..." (p. 88-89). With this sitting arrangement, the importance of the personality of The Man in the scheme of things becomes more manifest. The uniqueness of this room is profound, "... the only people who ever came into that room were the most senior members of the Cabal, about ten to twelve of them..." (p. 89). However, "Bako was the only outsider ever to have stepped foot in the room..." (p. 89). This is perhaps so because he is a heir to the political dynasty of his father, Senator Cafftan. It is in this secret room that The Man informs Bako that "your father's enemies will not rest until they eliminate you..."

so, it would be wise to be prepared to step into his shoes in the case of any eventuality” (p. 104).

Atogun chooses a hospital as a setting for most actions in the novel to accentuate the mysterious phenomena to be experienced in the fiction. It is here that the house of light is and it is also at this venue that the sick Senator Cafftan is accommodated. It is within this enclave also that The Man and the delectable Receptionist, Yoba, perform their weird duties. It “is (this) hospital, in a white room where the lights dazzled like the sun” (p. 144) that most actions in the novel take place. This health centre becomes a symbolic location for actions that are different from the usual activities that such a place is known for. Dr. Taju, who performs the fringe role of a medical practitioner in this hospital, assumes the spiritual duty of engaging in a wrestling bout with a mad man as a solution to the ailment of his priceless patient, Senator Cafftan. It is only in a novel of this stature that a trained medical doctor combines his civilized practice with the dictate of a marabout.

In this wrestling contest Dr. Taju must win to precurse the healing of the distinguished politician. This contest is presented to the ordinary people as “a comedy” (p. 150). It is an entertainment that promises to alleviate the sufferings of the poor! The umpire of this incredible wrestling contest is a spiritualist, “the chief marabout” (p. 151) who commands the doctor and the mad man thus, “... let the adversaries step out and get ready to fight” (p. 151). In doing this, the contestants are fulfilling “what the gods have said” (p. 151). In doing this Atogun reinforces the unusualness of this contest. The mad man wins the contest; he must win for he is a combination of the human and the spiritual. The most incredible “unholy barbarism” (p. 154) is the butchering of Dr. Taju and “his mutilated body, his blood sprinkling his assistants and soaking them as they thrust their knives into him” (p. 160). Perhaps, the medical doctor deserves no pity; he knows the weight of the risk he has undertaken. If he had won the duel Senator Cafftan would have remained alive and subsequently “picked him to be his running mate in the fourth coming election” (p. 156).

After this wrestling contest, the resolution of the conflicts becomes imminent. The death of the very important politician must take place before the unveiling of the singular personality who has killed Ave and poisoned Cafftan. Atogun chooses a political summit as the venue to bring the intrigues in the novel to a closure. Bako must be present to witness the exposure of the criminal. Gebu, the neighbor of Bako becomes the long expected culprit who had killed Bako's girlfriend Ave and had poisoned the food of Cafftan, Bako's father. The next intrigue that must be resolved is the identity of Yoba, the receptionist at the hospital. According to her “the politician who abused me years ago is the same person who poisoned our father...” (p. 166). Yoba is thus a half-sister of Bako. Gebu becomes the critical personality that is present in all the crimes perpetuated against the family of Senator Cafftan. Gebu has committed all these atrocities at the beset of the party Secretary who is described by Bako as “the traitor in our midst” (p. 200). Atogun graciously retains Cafftan's family at the epicenter of demure resolution with Bako finally assuming the position of his late father as the head of the unnamed political party with the self-styled name of



Cabillah' (p. 200).

Atogun in *Taduno's Songs* continues in the trajectory of the fairy tale literary technique. “Where there is a will there is always a way” (p. 2) represents the unbreakable spirit of the major protagonist, Taduno. He returns from exile to behold his people who have forgotten everything about his existence, but he still remembers his past social and personal engagements with them. Aroli his friend succinctly confirms the collective amnesia of the people; “I'm worried that it could be the rest of us who have lost our minds. I'm worried that a man who has lost his mind cannot be as same as you are. You know so much about us, yet we know nothing about you...” (p. 24). With the foregoing, Atogun begins the novel with elements of the supernatural. In line with this style, a mysterious letter locates him, “simply marked *TADUNO*-no last name, no address, just Taduno – managed to reach him in a nameless foreign town” (p. 1).

In the course of Atogun's narration, the real personality of the protagonist Taduno unfolds. He is a marked man by the agents of the government for his musical prowess that can cause an uprising in this fictional society. The novelist in his further revelation of this radical element tags him with the popular June 12, 1993 democratic impasse in Nigeria. At this point, the storyline becomes discernable; Taduno is a wanted man for using his music to fight the annulment of the election; “I realized that it was possible to depose the regime with music, so I continued to fight them with my songs” (p. 33). But the government cracks down on him, destroys all vestiges of his musical endeavours and at this point; “I no longer existed because there was no way I could continue to exist without my music. My music was me, and they took it away from me. That was when I gave up the struggle and went into exile” (p. 33). The above statement from Taduno fills the missing gap in the storyline.

As in *The Cabal* the novelist introduces a female character, Lela, who changes the dynamics of the work of fiction. It is the detention of Lela, Taduno's girlfriend by the agents of the government that has necessitated the return from exile of the major male protagonist. Lela is arrested and detained as a décor to arrest the main male protagonist. Atogun, not abating in his use of the narrative technique of a Tall Tale, uses mysterious letters to expand the scope of the novel. Coming back from exile, the major male character finds the location of Lela almost impossible. It is the second letter from her, “in a stained brown envelope similar to the one he had received in exile and it bore only his first name, no last name, no address” (p. 35) that gives a lead to her abode. The content of this letter highlights the agony of a lady who is incarcerated by the agents of the government for the 'sin' of Taduno.

Two individuals remain crucial in the world of Taduno – Lela and TK. These two personalities become the fulcrum of his quest for reconciliation with the government with the re-discovery of his voice to sing songs that will placard the members of the government. Of these two, he is sure of the location of Lela. For TK he bemoans; “if I find him we will be able to inspire each other. I will inspire him to produce again, and he will inspire me to sing again. I must find him!” (p. 51-52). For it is the collaborative

inspirations of Taduno and TK that will produce a good music which will massage the ego of the tyrants in power, and in turn lead to Lela's release from detention. Therefore, Taduno must physically go in search of TK and this opens a new vista in the narrative. Without any address or assistance from any one, he locates TK at the Tafawa Balewa Square. This effort of his further situates the novel in the realm of the folklore narrative.

The coming together of the duo quickens the conflict towards the point of a free fall resolution. Even though TK must be constantly hiding to avoid arrest; the music maestro and the famous music producer must work together to make the kind of music that will suit the taste of the president of this imaginary society. It is this that will serve as a prelude to the release of Lela from the grip of the tyrants. As the partners resume their musical activities, not with the aim of criticizing the government, but singing the praise of the major actors in it; Taduno still finds it tough attaining the height of perfection expected of him. For “even though his voice was much better it was not yet the voice of the man the government was looking for...” (p. 94). The urgency of the musician to meet the musical expectation of the ruler gets rekindled with the spurs of mysterious letters from Lela. These messages from his girlfriend serve as spikes of pressure to make him quickly “find his voice again”.

Finally, the inevitable happens to the musician; he is arrested and he meets the President while in detention. Through the solemnity of his music and its soothing effects on the guards, he gets information on the location of Lela; a most desired information for him. A guard whose duty includes keeping an eye on Taduno after getting soaked in the sobriety of Taduno's music volunteers elaborate information on Lela; “she is a brave woman. No amount of interrogation has been able to break her. We have never come across a woman like her...” (p. 125). The confession of this music intoxicated soldier becomes the novelist's way of revealing the hidden resilient characters of the heroine, Lela. The president of this nation remains sad and unwilling to release Taduno and Lela from the gallows because Taduno and his ilk “have tormented me with music for so long...” (p. 127-128).

The novelist infuses some traits of radicalism in Taduno while in detention. The powerful tyrant informs him that “I can bury you in this underground cell and no one will miss you” (p. 128). Taduno responds like a human right activist “I want my right. Every citizen of this country wants their rights” (p. 129). The maximum ruler informs him; “This is not a civilian regime, this is a military regime...” (p. 129). In a manner of finality the President says “your girlfriend remains my prisoner until you use your music to promote my government” (p. 135). He further arduously makes a proclamation; “you have four weeks to prove your loyalty to my government with a hit song... if you fail, you will never see your girl alive again. As I speak, you are a free man...” (p. 136). With this, the choice before Taduno becomes slim; sing a song to praise the government or risk his girlfriend die in detention.

The second disappearance of TK the music producer becomes the novelist's technique of prolonging the anxiety level of the reader. In the search for TK for the second time,

the novelist exposes to the readers the importance of a mere music to the wellbeing of the citizens of this fictional society. For instance, it is Taduno's promise to produce a piece of music that will exult the government of the tyrant that has witnessed the withdrawal of soldiers “from the streets” (p. 161). In the absence of TK, Mr. Player, another fringe character steps into his shoe to produce the required music that will tickle the fancy of the maximum ruler. The offer from the President for Taduno to have “his face on a new five hundred naira bill – the opportunity to own (his) own money... order any amount of this note to be printed and delivered to (him) as frequently as (he) likes...” (p. 177) sound extremely bizarre and can be showcased in a fairy tale.

In trying to give the novel a semblance of reality, the 'new' Taduno recognizes that the subsequent music from his stable will be “a farewell to conscience” (p. 191). The audience of his new type of music still has the faith that the music maestro will not fail them. The newscaster at Channel Four echoes the voice of the people that “Taduno is back with a bang... The people have a voice once again” (p. 191). With the sudden appearance of TK and a mysterious letter from Lela, Atogun infuses some courage in the protagonist. While TK looks forward to “the way of a miracle. A miracle could happen...” (p. 194), Lela in her letter advises Taduno “not to praise tyranny” (p. 197).

Atogun thus concludes the storyline on a hazy pattern as in the beginning of the novel. It is on the note of suspense that the novelist concludes the novel. The last sentence from Taduno the musician is that “... you can never win against the people, we will not surrender to tyranny” (p. 218) becomes the synthesis of the entire work of fiction. With this utterance, he has chosen to remain with the people and play the music that will appeal to them as against making a choice that will please the tyrant. He is aware of the consequences of this choice; he has abandoned his girlfriend at the mercy of the President. He stands every chance of facing the bullets of “the black assassin” (p.218). In anticipation of this most likely inevitable end “he closed his eyes and begged love for forgiveness” (p. 218). Before now, the same love had encourages him to be courageous and not pander to the wishes of a tyrant.

*In Wake Me When I'm Gone*, Atogun follows his renowned and remarkable path of folkloric narrative. Here the female protagonist, Ese, transverses through a mix of near realistic and more of imaginary situations. The famous Nigerian novelist, Helon Habila sees this novel as a combination of “folkloric elements with a strong central character to create a haunting and unusual narrative” (en.m.wikipedia.org). Andrew Nwagbara posits that “Atogun is seen to adopt the traditional African folklore narrative technique in creating the tortuous journey of Ese, the protagonist” (p. 32). Habila's view which tallies with this line of discussion is that the novel contains a surplus “use of tradition and exploit the masses”. On the flip side of the coin, Habila expounds the opinion that the novel is “an allegory about the endless contest between good and bad, and how the universe sometimes-but not always-sides with the good against the bad” (en.m.wikipedia.org). Atogun in this novel “unfolds a world rich with tradition and folklore, a world filled with incredible people of remarkable strength...” (ouidabook.com). The novel is also seen from the prism “of curses broken and lives remade, of great tragedy and incredible rebirth”. (ouidabook.com).



From the onset of the novel, Atogun wastes no time in bringing to the open, the personality of Ese, the major female central character who at the tender age of twenty four is widowed with a son, Noah. The physical portrait of Ese marks the beginning of a catalogue of intrigues and conflicts that the novelist discusses in the novel. More weird is the presentation of the esoteric painting of Ese by Atogun. Its disappearance from the village “on a dark rainy night” (p. 1), and the chilling prophecy from the revered High Priest “warning us of a curse that would beset our village for many years” (p. 1) until it is found. This picture of horror lays bare the foot path of further mysterious encounters to expect in the prose fiction. The marriage between Ese and Tanto is one of such mysterious events; two love birds getting married without the consent of their families. This thus becomes “a man and a woman with no family” (p. 5) who have committed an offence that “went against the laws of the land” (p. 6). The lure in business at the Main Street Market due to the absence of Ese after the death of her husband represents another aspect of the mystery pervading this village. How can the absence of one person in a bustling market bring business activities to a permanent halt? To lay credence to this, Chair-Lady (the leader of the market people) in reference to Ese says that “The merchants prefer to do business with you. And, I must say you seem to be our good omen on Main Street. Without you things are not the same...” (p. 7-8). The consequences of her refusal to return to the market attracts enormous negative consequences for her. “No one wanted to be connected to me. Main Street was the soul of our village; now, everyone blamed me for its fall and none cared to consider that I was still mourning the loss of my husband...” (p. 9) “She has thus become an outcast in the village” (p. 10).

The law of this imaginary community which insists that “a widow must remarry within six months or lose custody of her children” (p. 15) can only be applicable in a “tales by moonlight” scenario. The prejudices against the widows in most works of fiction by African writers remain absurd, but nothing can be more bizarre than this kind of traditional injunction. “Ese's duty is to remarry as prescribed by our laws. If she fails to do so, she must give up the boy...” (p. 15). This magisterial order of a village chief who is supposed to protect the rights of the vulnerable like Ese is far-fetched. Of utmost offensive is the desire of the chief to forcefully marry Ese. “I knew that chief had married some young widows in the past, but none had been forced to marry him, so the situation I found myself in had never been known in the village before” (p. 23), she laments. When the pendulum of justice finally swings against her for refusing to abide by the law targeted at (her), the High Priest spoke thus; “we have found you guilty of refusing to remarry as stipulated by the laws of our land. As such, you shall lose custody of your son until you comply with the laws” (p. 44). This becomes an extension of the absurd; because she is made to receive the punishment of a widow who refuses to forcefully marry the village chief.

The novelist introduces the concept of a dream, an aspect of the magical realism philosophy. The dream of the Chief becomes the issue that helps in abrogating the evil law against widows who must remarry within six months of their widowhood or forfeit the custody of their children to their husband's brother. In the chief's strange dream he saw a young child holding a device to which his heart and that of his horse

were connected. The boy was sad, because he had been separated from his mother and all that he had ever known. He had no one to play with, and the device in his hand was all that he had. If he pressed the button on the device, the chief and his horse would die... (p. 62).

Prior to this dream, the chief and his precious horse have fallen ill. This dream therefore, establishes a nexus between the illnesses of the chief and his horse on one hand, with the ill treatment of Ese. The verdict of “all the wise men in the land” (p. 62) on the dream is that “The Chief must repeal any extant law that separates mother and child, or else both he and his horse would die” (p. 62). It is this dream that brings an end to the law compelling widows to remarry or forfeit the custody of their children to their husbands' brothers.

The novelist further introduces situations and characters that are strange to the narrative as his way of prolonging the conflicts. The painting of Ese by “a young man called Toya” (p. 69) helps explain the source of the painting of Ese at the beginning of the novel but fails to resolve the mysticism surrounding the art work. The novelist elevates the status of the painting to such a pre-eminent position that it becomes the source of the various detours that the storyline goes through till the end of the novel. It is this portrait of Ese for instance, that has “a slightly bemused expression (spread) across my face” (p. 01) that suddenly gets missing. This is an art work “that would change the destiny of so many....” (p. 1). Many tourists besiege “... the painting in the shrine of Toya...” (p. 72) which is positioned at a strategic location in the village. The village Chief is not an exception to those who visit the shrine often. According to Ese he “became a regular visitor of the shrine too. He would sit there for hours admiring me in the painting” (p. 72). Therefore, at the disappearance of this portrait, “Everyone knew that the Chief had stolen the painting, but no one could confront him” (p. 73). The prophesy of the dying High Chief that “a young man, whose half-observed face was captured in the stolen painting would return one day to be Chief” (p. 79) becomes fulfilled when 'Noah' finds the painting” in a room filled with old boxes and piles of junk... in an abode of orphans....

“Promise me you'll wake me when I'm gone” (p. 95) by Noah in the first part of this novel is the source of the title of the novel and the apocalypse of more unbelievable events to expect in the fiction. This statement from this lad becomes that whose interpretation can assume several diversities. He may be reminding his mother on his sick bed not to abandon his desire to build an orphanage at his demise. This statement may also mean that Noah, like the phoenix, the mythological bird, will die and 'rise' again in the second part of the novel to fulfill his assigned destiny. Ese's journey for the famous herbalist Mazamaza, becomes Atogun's way of not making Ese witness the death and burial of her son Noah, thereby making it extremely impossible for her to believe on her return that Noah had passed on and buried. It is this non-belief that she carries on to the second part of the novel. Also, Mazamaza's prediction that “One day your son will live again” (p. 100) becomes fulfilled in the second part of the prose fiction. Ese in her misjudgment of the time and place to fulfill her son's wish to construct a home for the orphans commits a traditional crime. “Are you aware that it's

against the law for women to build in our village? Are you aware that it's the worst taboo you can think of? And that any woman who breaks the law faces death by hanging?...” (p. 115), queries the new High Priest. She must thus leave her anonymous homestead or face death by hanging. The second phase of her destiny fulfillment begins with her search for a new location, a new society, a new environment.

On her second journey similar to her search for Mazamaza, she receives moral palliatives from strangers and according to her, she “arrives in a small village (after) a month's journey by foot from the village of my birth” (p. 120). As expected of a Tall Tale nature of this novel Ese meets mysterious Mama, “the kind old widow” (p. 120) who has been waiting for her arrival. According to Mama “long before now... a prophet predicted your coming. He said you would come from a distant village, a beautiful young widow, with two gold ear rings” (p. 120). Mama further explains the content of the prophesy; the prophet says “that when you arrived I should know that my time to go have come” (p. 120). To further paint a surreal narrative, Mama informs Ese “And this is your destiny. The whole village knows that you are coming; I have told them about you...” (p. 121). Ese however, derives consolation from Mama's more pitiable experiences; she informs Ese that “I have lost my husband and my children, yet I waited for you for twenty years... Now I have fulfilled my destiny... You must learn to be strong and happy if you are to fulfill yours” (p. 121). She finally advises Ese, “never tell anyone else the reason why you fled your village. Your village and ours have similar traditions. If they know, they will not accept you here” (p. 121). Mama's death a few days later brings an end to her sojourn and opens a new vista in the life of the major female protagonist who has come to continue her trajectory of the unbelievable.

In this new environment Ese runs into the same traditional animosities against the orphans; “they were also regarded as evil children and treated as slaves in this village” (p. 127). Atogun establishes a convergence between the late Mama and Ese in their quest to establish a home for the orphans. But the elder woman's desire was thwarted by the late Chief of this community. Therefore, Ese confirms her destined role in this new environment; she “had been chosen for a mission” (p. 128) to succeed where her benefactor had failed. She further confesses “It was as if the dream in which I had found myself was growing more surreal by the seconds” (p. 136). From this statement, Atogun finally situates this novel within the ambit of a folkloric fiction. The novelist accentuates this line of proposition when the supposed reincarnated 'Noah' confesses “I don't have a name. Everyone calls me boy. I have no father or mother. I have no sister or brother. I have no one. I have been wandering for longer than I can remember...” (p. 136). For it is in a fairy tale that this type of personality can be found. For certainty, he is not the late Noah who has reincarnated; for “... the prominent birth mark that was on Noah's upper back was not visible in his body” (p. 136).

The novelist steers the fiction towards Ese's realization of her destiny; that of providing a home for the orphans. In doing this she commits a grievous crime and the punishment is highly punitive. At the communal assembly convoked by the young Chief to decide the fate of Ese, the High Chief informs the audience of the gravity of

punishment that awaits Ese; “within days... (she) will go blind, run mad and die” (p. 183). But the young Chief in taking sides with Ese invites a son of the land who “ran away... as an orphan, because (he) was subjected to unthinkable torture”( p. 181) by the same village tradition. His speech at this ceremony sways support in favour of Ese. With the overwhelming support of the people, she triumphs in her desire to provide shelter for the orphans and this brings about an abrogation of the punitive law against her action. Ese pronounces majestically, “seven days after the meeting at the palace, I had not gone blind or run mad. And I was still alive. On the eight day, most of the villagers gathered in front of my house to find out what had become of me”( p. 192). “The next day, the priests gathered their families and left the village quietly, paving the way for a new dawn” (p. 193).

Finally, the importance of the 'Gate' is captured in the epilogue which presents Atogun the opportunity to resolve all the conflicts and bring to fruition the dreamlike prophecies that have shaped the trajectory of Ese and the “new Noah” in the second part of the novel. It is symbolical that in this concluding section, the location of the 'Gate' is where the mother and son part ways finally--- “A few days later, I drove with him in his car to the Gate” (p. 197)--- and her paring admonishing to her son at this location is; “Go and pursue your destiny, my son” (p. 197).

### III

In these three novels, Odafe Atogun adopts similar literary techniques to showcase them as patent folkloric narratives. He follows the Tutuolanian, Kafkaesque and Orwellian patterns of storytelling in these prose fictions. He creates personalities who are close to the major characters in each of the novels. These close associates help shape the character of these major protagonists and the directions of the novels. In *Taduno's Songs*, Taduno has a close friend Aroli and subsequently TK whose combined efforts assist the writer to prolong the intrigues in the novel. In *The Cabal*, Bako has The Man and AY as close companions. With their collaborative efforts, the writer resolves the multiple intrigues present in the novel. The novelist in *Wake Me When I'm Gone* employs Kpofe, the young Chief and Mama as accomplices to the main female central character, Ese, in her tortuous efforts in righting the traditional wrongs in both her fictional societies. In doing all of these Atogun adopts a similar literary device similar to Orwell in *Animal Farm* where Napoleon the fabled emperor is surrounded by a handful of characters like Squelar to achieve the writer's intention of justifying the claim that “all animals are equal but some are more equal than others” (Orwell).

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